NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Conserve O Gram

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Dusting Wooden Objects

Dust on the surface of wooden objects can act as an abrasive, attract moisture, and be visually unattractive. Repeated removal of dust from surfaces of wooden objects can damage the finish. The best strategy is to prevent dust from accumulating on museum objects whenever possible. Protect stored objects with dust covers (see *Conserve O Gram* 4/2) or place them in enclosed storage cabinets (see *Conserve O Gram* 4/1). Enclosed display cases provide the best protection for objects on exhibit; however, objects exhibited in furnished rooms cannot be protected in this way. Dust in these rooms can be minimized by routinely vacuuming visitor path runners, changing vacuum cleaner bags, keeping air handler filters clean, installing entrance door mats, and installing weather-stripping. The frequency with which dusting is required will vary considerably depending on site conditions.

Before handling or dusting finished wood (i.e., wood coated with varnish, shellac, paint or lacquer), check the condition of the finish. Finishes that are unstable (e.g., flaking, cracking, lifting edges), or wood surfaces that have loose or lifting veneer or splintered corners or edges, should not be dusted. Request the advice of a conservator when objects are in this unstable condition, particularly if the finishes are original.

Dusting with a Vacuum Cleaner

Vacuuming with a soft brush attachment is, under most circumstances, the most effective way to remove dust from stable finished wooden surfaces and from the surrounding area. Vacuuming is also recommended for unfinished wood, because rough woods can snag dust cloths, and because dust that settles in the wood pores cannot be removed by wiping with a cloth. Vacuuming is effective for heavily soiled surfaces, including those with sooty or abrasive dust that might be streaked or scratched by a cloth. Do not apply pressure with the brush attachment, but gently stroke the surface.

The small, battery-operated vacuums manufactured primarily for use with electronic equipment are useful for removing dust from small, delicate wooden objects. The suction is considerably weaker than that of conventional vacuums. The narrow nozzle allows access to nooks and crannies not possible with larger vacuums. Most of these units come with brush attachments.

A soft artist's brush can be used in conjunction with a low suction vacuum cleaner to dust delicate finishes, provided the finish is not lifting or peeling. This technique is also often appropriate for dusting small objects or picture frames, intricate carvings, details or corners, or surfaces finished in stable gold leaf. Hold the vacuum nozzle just above the wood surface; do not allow it to touch the surface. With the soft brush in the other hand, gently sweep the dust off the surface, out of crevices or moldings, and toward the vacuum cleaner nozzle. A camera lens brush or the soft brushes available from archival suppliers can also be used.

Dusting with Cloths

Use a soft, dry cotton cloth. Turn the cloth frequently, presenting a clean surface to the object with each pass, so that the dust does not abrade the surface. Have numerous cloths on hand and keep them clean.

In environments with low relative humidity, the cloth and the dust can develop a static charge and repel one another, making it difficult to remove the dust efficiently. To prevent this when dusting finished wood in stable condition, the cloth can be very slightly dampened with clear water. If there is any question as to whether the finish is water-soluble, test with a dampened cotton swab in a hidden area. If any finish is removed, do not use a moist cloth. Dust the object and then wipe with a second cloth to dry. Take care that moisture is not left on the surface and that dust is not pushed by the cloth into corners and crevices of the furniture. Do not use a moistened cloth to dust unfinished wood.

An alternative type of cloth made of Tyvek® stitched with nylon, called Dust Bunny™ Magnetic Wiping Fabric, has been developed by Dupont. This cloth attracts dust more effectively than a conventional dust cloth through a combination of low electrical conductivity and high surface area. The cloth attracts dust without the use of additives, is lint-free, and does not scratch.

A less preferred alternative in dry, dusty environments is a cloth sprayed with a moderate amount of light mineral oil in an aerosol form, such as Endust® (does not contain silicone). This oil enables the cloth to pick up significantly more dust and not scatter it about. *NOTE:* This product should be used only on finished wood, and should not be sprayed directly on the object. Its purpose is only to attract dust, and not to shine or polish the surface. Use this oil only in extreme moderation, and do not apply it if an effective alternative can be found or if the finish is damaged in any way.

Dusting with Compressed Gas

Dust can be removed from particularly fragile objects or from rough or hard to reach areas (e.g., irregular surfaces such as rush or wicker, crevices, or deeply carved surfaces) using a stream of compressed air. Air pressure should be limited to a maximum of five pounds. If an air compressor is not available, canisters containing compressed gases used for cleaning photographic equipment are available from photographic stores and suppliers. Do not use those containing chlorofluorocarbons, which damage the earth's ozone layer. Hold the canister nozzle at least four inches from the object and do not shake the canister during use. If an object is particularly dirty, remove it from the exhibit or storage area before dusting.

Keep Cleaning Tools Clean

Clean the cloths, brushes, and brush attachments with a mild solution of Ivory® Soap Flakes or highly concentrated Orvus® Paste and water, rinse well, and let dry completely before reusing. Do not use fabric softeners in washing dust cloths. Label dusting tools and do not use the same ones for the floor and for museum objects.

Do Not Use:

- **feather dusters** because they scatter the dust into the air and broken feathers can scratch the furniture surface.
- **commercial formulations**, such as aerosol or liquid furniture polishes, that frequently contain silicones (see *Conserve O Gram* 7/6) and tung, lemon, or linseed oil.
- **commercially treated dust cloths** because they may also contain silicones or other damaging additives.

Sources

Dust Bunny Magnetic Wiping Fabric cloths are manufactured by Leap Frog™ Technologies, Altoona, PA 16684-0304, (800) 822-3878. They are also available through some archival supply vendors and from Modern Solutions Corporation, 6370 Copps Avenue, Madison, WI 53716, (800) 286-2023. (*NOTE:* Modern

Solutions Corporation will provide a free sample upon request.)

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